

NEWS RELEASE



OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA San Diego, California

***United States Attorney
Karen P. Hewitt***

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For Immediate Release

NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY - February 28, 2007

OPERATION IMPERIAL EMPEROR RESULTS IN SAN DIEGO INDICTMENT OF NINETEEN MEMBERS OF MEXICAN DRUG RING

United States Attorney Karen P. Hewitt today announced the takedown of Operation Imperial Emperor, a multi-jurisdictional investigation that resulted in the indictment of Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum and eighteen persons alleged to be members of his drug trafficking organization. This international cocaine distribution ring is allegedly responsible for smuggling multi-ton quantities of cocaine from Mexico to the streets of several major metropolitan areas throughout the United States. This twenty-month long investigation has resulted nationwide in more than 300 arrests, and the seizures of more than \$45 million in U.S. currency, 9,490 pounds of cocaine, 8 pounds of heroin, 226 pounds of pure methamphetamine or ice, 27,218 pounds marijuana, 465 marijuana plants, \$5,300,00.00 in real property, 61 vehicles and 83 firearms.

Operation Imperial Emperor was part of the Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Forces program (OCDETF) the efforts of which in this case resulted in indictments in the Southern District of California, and the filing of state charges in Imperial and San Diego Counties. The federal indictment in San Diego charges nineteen defendants with: conspiracy to import five or more kilograms of cocaine, five or more grams of ice methamphetamine and one thousand or more kilograms of marijuana into the United States, in violation of Title 21, United States Code, Sections 952, 960 and 963; conspiracy to distribute five or more kilograms of cocaine, five or more grams of ice methamphetamine and one thousand or more kilograms of marijuana, in violation of Title 21, United States Code, Sections 841(a)(1) and 846; engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise, in violation of Title 21, United States Code, Sections 848(b); and several substantive counts of importation, distribution and possession with the intent to distribute five or more kilograms of cocaine, five or more grams of ice methamphetamine and one thousand or more kilograms of marijuana, in violation of Title 21, United States Code, Sections 952, 960841(a)(1). Among those charged in San Diego are defendants Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum, Jose Oscar Del Castillo-Gallardo, Carlos Cuevas Jr., Sergio Kaiser-Chavez, Santos Fabian Rocha Salazar, Carlos Valle-Castorena, Miguel Angel Cardenas Garcia, Jose Ismael Urquiza, Luis Eduardo Alvarez, Karlo Humberto Armenta-Ocampo, Gilbert Vasquez-Chavez, Octavio Amezcua, Rosario Garcia-Cardenas, Gaspar Puentes Herrera, Arturo Guardado-Chaidez, Elisa Valenzuela Peña, Tony Ramos, Arturo Flores Medina, and Roberto Daniel Lopez.

According to documents unsealed today, Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum and other co-defendants conspired to import, conspired to distribute, imported, and distributed tons of cocaine brought into the United States from Mexico. Cazares-Gastellum, the head of this drug trafficking organization, acquired large amounts of cocaine from sources in Mexico, and through the use of U.S. cells transported the cocaine for distribution throughout the United States. Defendants Jose Oscar Del Castillo-Gallardo, Carlos Cuevas Jr., Sergio Kaiser-Chavez are alleged to have headed the cocaine transportation operation between Mexico and the United States. Eventually, the profits from the illegal importation and distribution activities were returned from the United States to Cazares-Gastellum in Mexico.

Other defendants are charged with playing various roles in the importation and distribution conspiracies. Defendants Salazar, Valle-Castorena, M. Garcia, Urquiza, Guardado, Alvarez, Aremnta, Herrera and Amezcua allegedly facilitated regular importation and distribution operations conducted by the transportation cell. Defendants Vasquez, R. Garcia, Pena, Ramos, Medina and Lopez are alleged to have transported controlled substances on behalf of the transportation cell. According to the charges, Cazares-Gastellum masterminded a comprehensive distribution organization which vertically controlled all aspects of acquisition, importation, transportation, distribution and the laundering of cash proceeds.

Throughout the early morning hours of February 28, 2007, members of the Cazares-Gastellum organization in the Southern District of California were awakened by the simultaneous execution of arrest and search warrants by federal, state and local law enforcement officers. So far, nine of the nineteen federally indicted defendants have been arrested. In addition, during the Southern District of California's investigation the following seizures occurred: \$1,870,095 in U.S. currency, 1,230 pounds of cocaine, 73 pounds of methamphetamine, 1,954 pounds of marijuana, and six firearms including three assault rifles.

Operation Imperial Emperor was the result of a multi-jurisdictional coalition of investigative agencies spearheaded by DEA offices located in San Diego, California, Imperial, California, Los Angeles, California, Oakland, California, Chicago, Illinois, New York, New York, Yuma, Arizona. Strategic intelligence and operational support was provided by the DEA Special Operations Division based in Virginia, and the El Paso Intelligence Center based in El Paso, Texas.

In particular, United States Attorney Hewitt praised the investigative efforts of the DEA's Imperial County District Office, the El Centro Police Department and Imperial County Sheriff's Department for their outstanding work in this investigation and resulting prosecution. Ms. Hewitt also noted with appreciation the logistical and operational support also provided by El Centro Police Department, Imperial County Sheriff's Department, Calexico Police Department, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Border Patrol, Customs and Border Protection, Brawley Police Department, and the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement.

DEFENDANTS**Case Number:****07cr0449-WQH**

Victor Emilio Cazares-Gastellum
Jose Oscar Del Castillo-Gallardo
Carlos Cuevas Jr.
Sergio Kaiser-Chavez
Santos Fabian Rocha Salazar
Carlos Valle-Castorena
Miguel Angel Cardenas Garcia
Jose Ismael Urquiza
Luis Eduardo Alvarez
Karlo Humberto Armenta-Ocampo
Gilbert Vasquez-Chavez
Octavio Amezcua
Rosario Garcia-Cardenas
Gaspar Puentes Herrera
Arturo Guardado-Chaidez
Elisa Valenzuela Peña
Tony Ramos
Arturo Flores Medina
Roberto Daniel Lopez

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Conspiracy to Distribute a Controlled Substance, Title 21, U.S.C., Secs. 846 and 841(a)(1),

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine

Conspiracy to Import a Controlled Substance; Title 21 U.S.C., Secs. 952, 960 and 963,

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine;

Continuing Criminal Enterprise; Title 21, U.S.C., Secs. 848(a) and (b)

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine;

Conspiracy to Launder Money; Title 18, U.S.C., Sec. 1956(h)

Maximum Penalty: Enhanced sentence; Forfeiture

Distribution of a Controlled Substance; Title 21, U.S.C., Sec. 841(a)(1)

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine

Importation of a Controlled Substance; Title 21, U.S.C., Secs. 952 and 960

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine

Possession with Intent to Distribute a Controlled Substance; Title 21, U.S.C., 841(a)(1)

Maximum Penalty: Life Imprisonment; \$4,000,000.00 fine

Criminal Forfeiture; Title 21, U.S.C., Sec. 853

INVESTIGATING AGENCIES

Drug Enforcement Administration
El Centro Police Department
Imperial County Sheriff's Department
Calexico Police Department
Brawley Police Department
California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement
Immigration and Customs Enforcement
U.S. Border Patrol
Customs and Border Protection

An indictment itself is not evidence that the defendants committed the crimes charged. The defendants are presumed innocent until the Government meets its burden in court of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.